

Margrethe Bruun Vaage:
The Antihero in American Television.
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Between heroes and villains is the antihero, a complex character who is an amalgam of, on the one hand, desirable character traits and, on the other hand, objectional behavior. This is the sympathetic gangster boss Tony in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), caring family father and meth cook Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), and serial killer Dexter who kills other serial killers in *Dexter* (2006-2013). The antihero is a recurring figure in television drama where we build sympathies over long stretches of time, thus accepting morally objectional behavior because we are heavily invested in a character. Why do we like the antihero? Why not prefer a hero or be immoral and chose a villain? In *The Antihero in American Television*, cognitive film scholar Margrethe Bruun Vaage discusses what moral engagements viewers have with an antihero, the nature of moral emotions and engagements, and why there are so many antiheroes in contemporary television?

In Chapter 1, Vaage sets out the theoretical foundation for her journey into morally murky waters. The antihero – who is mostly a man – “truly is immoral in the sense that he is continually violating moral principles” (p. xi). Also, he is a stable element in what Jason Mittell coined complex TV, also known as quality TV and associated with HBO and *The Sopranos*. Complex TV wants us to reflect. Vaage is a cognitive film theorist and draws from moral psychology and moral emotions. A debate in media theory is whether a viewer shares a character’s evil or not. Vaage draws on psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Joshua Greene’s model of a dual-process morality: Moral judgment can be quick and intuitive (gut feelings) or deliberate, rational, and slow.

Dual-process morality says judgment draws first from moral emotional intuitions and secondly from rational deliberation. That is, moral emotions are pre-rational and pre-reflective, drawing on innate and socially learned and accepted rules. The dual-working of our mind is what Daniel Kahneman calls *fast* and *slow thinking* (Kahneman 2011). An innate rule is that we prefer our own and people we know, and because we know the antihero, we side with him. First move in the dual process is instinctive moral emotions, second move is deliberate reflection. Vaage, in building her basic theory, calls the first move “fictional relief” and the latter “reality check.” Fictional relief is when we accept the story as fiction and a place where we can put our “cognitive guards” down. We experience the story instinctively *because* we first accept it as fiction. Thus, we let our moral intuitions reign. However, the antihero series also calls attention to the antihero as transgressive, and we then re-consider our sympathies. For example, in *Breaking Bad* (2.5), Walter sends his partner Jesse to threaten two dealers who have stolen from them. Walter and Jesse need to appear strong, however, the thieves are sorry drug addicts with a neglected five-year old child. Clearly, Walter is the bad guy because he cooks and delivers the drugs leading to this child neglect. This is the “reality check” that makes a viewer reconsider Walter’s actions. Vaage argues that the antihero invites both “fictional relief” (it is enjoyable and only fiction) and “reality check” (the antihero is really committing immoral acts).

Chapter 2, “Partiality”, explores how Western concepts of justice and democracy are culturally constructed while our innate morality spells loyalty to family and a group. “The antihero is not amoral; he is loyal toward his own and can thus be seen as following a moral code” (p. 39). Not surprisingly, many antiheroes are gangsters or other type of criminals with a code of honor (e.g. family) which we intuitively accept. We prefer our own and make excuses for them. Our engagement with characters in long-term narratives “activates some of the same mental mechanisms as friendship does in real life” (p. 42) and “[t]he spectator is blinded by familiarity – meaning that she will turn a blind eye to the liked character’s moral flaws” (p. 45).

Chapter 3, “Suspense and Moral Evaluation”, examines how the suspense in fiction invites pre-reflectively moral evaluation. Simply put, we instinctively empathise with a character in a suspenseful situation whether he is a hero or villain. As embodied cognition explains, we automatically mirror a situation we find captivating. And the plots always place antiheroes in suspenseful situations that are dramatic, thus captivating a viewer. We respond *before* we think and evaluate our moral judgment.

Chapter 4 asks if we sympathize with the antihero’s immoral acts? That is, withstanding he is a family man or has a code of honor, do we agree with his crimes? This is a complex question, and Vaage suggests not one but several answers. First, we are attracted to the antihero because he is powerful. Where legal justice may fail to punish wrong-doers, he doesn’t. Second, he is unpredictable, and we are not entirely sure how he will act. Thus, “[the antihero series’] moral structure is dynamic or unstable” (p. 92). Third, shifting between fictional relief and reality check, we move in and out of moral judgment, and

“the antihero series temporarily becomes a narrative in which one does not sympathize with anyone” (p. 92). In this process, we *question* our own moral compass. What Emily Nussbaum has called a “bad fan” is a fan who reads the antihero simply as attractive or as evil, and do not oscillate between immersion and distanced moral reflection. Fourth, there are various fictional tools being used, including dark humor, aesthetic pleasures (e.g. of a “dandy villain” (p. 106)), narrative curiosity, and what Mittell calls operational aesthetics and forensic fandom making fans do cognitive work like ludic play.

Mostly, however, we see the antihero as being morally right from our intuitive moral engagement. Chapter 5 investigates how this is supported by opposing the antihero to a villain who is a purely amoral contrast character. There are inexcusable acts such as rape, and series use such acts to differ between villains and antiheroes. Thus, we can accept that the antihero commits murder, because this is motivated by innate morality (protecting family or upholding a code), but there are acts like rape that we deem morally disgusting and unforgivable. Chapter 6, finally, discusses why the antihero’s wife is so often hated by fans. Essentially, she represents the claustrophobic home and family and thus functions as an obstacle to the antihero’s exciting adventures. And when the antihero is a woman, as in *Nurse Jackie*, *Weeds*, and *Banshee*, she is not a gangster boss or serial killer, but a less transgressive character.

The Antihero in American Television makes an excellent introduction to the contemporary antihero series, to cognitive film theory, and to more philosophical questions of moral emotions. It introduces theory from both cognitive media studies and the wider field of cognitive studies in a clear and well-written manner that makes this accessible even to a reader unfamiliar with such theories. This will be a seminal study in moral emotions and television drama. So, ultimately, why does Vaage think we like the antihero? At the core might be a pleasure in transgression, because “... although the root of our liking of the antihero lies in intuitive moral responses, the reality checks reminding the spectator of the immorality of the antihero are also an intended, central part of the experience of engaging with the series. The thought-provoking effect of having enjoyed something immoral is core to the very attraction of the antihero series” (p. 117).

References

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